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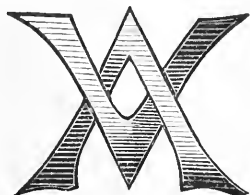
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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



The Legend of
St. Olaf's Kirk.



BOSTON :
ESTES & LAURIAT.
1880.



W. H.

Author of "CHRISTMAS BOOKLET," "SONGS FROM OVER THE SEA," "PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS," "ALBUM LEAVES," "DRIFT FROM YORK HARBOR, MAINE," ETC.



1880.

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PART FIRST.

Scene, Norway. Period, Anno Domini 1150.

I. VALBORG.

His name was Axel Tordsen ; Valborg, hers.
In Norway both were nurtured, whose green vales,
Tucked in between the shadows of snow horns,
Have cradled many a hero ; Nidaros
Their home,—now Throndheim, throne-home of the kings,
And still the crowning-place. Of royal strain
Was Axel, boon companion of the Prince ;
And she was kin to both, the last sad gift
Of fair Wynhilda, lady of the court,
Who, new to motherhood, had from a swoon
Aroused, asked that the little one be set
Before her, kissed it once or twice, moaned low,
And with large, wistful eyes still fixed on it,
Telling the anguish the poor lips could not,
Had wept, turned sidewise that she yet might gaze,
And died thus gazing. Whereupon, the babe,
Awed by the sudden stillness, ceased to wail,
And from a near room, echo like, arose
The sobbing of another, fuller lunged,—
The man-child Axel.

Comely Valborg grew ;
Her wondrous eyes, blue as the summer sky,
Were brimmed with sunshine, overflowed, and filled

“Which one was that?” pursued the Queen, and slipped
One arm about her, drawing her more close.

But Valborg would not tell.

Even from that day

The Princess dressed no costlier, and when next
The yule-log blazed, and from each drifted grange
Was thrust an unthreshed barley sheaf to give
The snow-birds greeting, 'mong her gifts shone forth
A jeweled harp, together with these words
From Thora: “Child, thy tongue with this in tune
Will sometime call a courtier to thy feet;
Choose then the likeliest, who can offer thee
Most honor; try the time-beat of his pulse,
And woman's wit will prompt thee by which lay,
Plaintive or glad, love-warmed or valorous,
To leash and tether him.”

Thereby it came

That Friar Knud, the tutor of the Prince,
Was bidden to teach its use; and week by week
With lessening weariness and growing love
Her deft hands learned to chase the melody
From string to string through mazy harmonies,
Until the instrument, jealous at first
And obstinate, became a willing slave,
Seemed part of her, and Valborg and her harp
Were mouthpiece of the household. Winter nights,
When weary with long sloth the roisterers lounged
About the men's-hall, yawning for clear sky,
Sudden the clamor of their tongues would cease,
The air grow clearer so the rafters came
In sight, and from them, like a summer rain
To dry and pinched-up herbage, softly fall
The warm, sweet restfulness of voice and strings.

Sometimes she sang old sagas, the ripe verse
Of song-smiths from a vigorous age long past,
Fresh with salt sea-breeze, warm with lusty blood,
Filling their hearts with June, and bringing them
Whose knees were 'neath the tables, beard to beard
And horn to horn with Olaf's merry court,—
The elders silent, glad to hear retold
The tales, familiar, of their downthrown gods,
Not utterly unloved though altarless.
Again she led them, following the flight
Of Leif the lucky, who with raven guide
Hounding the sun, first pierced that shadowy realm,
The Sea of Darkness, and in the sounding surf
Off Kjalarness in Vinland boldly pitched
His seat-posts, bidding them swim forth and find
Convenient harborage. This tale of Leif
Was like a wand that felled their frosty walls,
Shot sunlight 'cross the sea-crests, and above
Upon the mirror of o'er-roofing heaven,
Mirage-like trembling into form, disclosed
The wonders of the West,—that long-lost land
Where summer played the truant all the year,
Where brooks sang over beds of gravelly gold,
And native grapes, ungrafted and untilled,
Trailed purpling to the greensward, broken-skinned
And bubbling forth their sweetness.

When she ceased

Deep silence followed, every face intent
Upon the firebrands, till some whaleman spake
Of seeing ersttime in an Iceland home
A copper bowl, long handled, brought by Leif
From over-seas, wherefrom (the legend ran)
The Vinlanders quaffed fire, were for a space

Valborg.

Consumed, and when the wreathing smoke had cleared,
Behold! they had cast off their slough of years
And were grown sound and jocund.

Whereupon

Some youth would link his story to the last,
Saying he had from Vinland fresher news
By three half centuries, and pass around
A strange brown bean, banded and streakt with blood,
Wrecked by the breakers of a sou'west gale
Upon the holm-bar.

Then with flagging speech

Again all eyes would turn to Valborg's harp,
And unasked she would answer. All folk loved
The blue-eyed singer,—Axel not the least.
She called him “brother Axel,” but one eve
He answered: “Valborg, do not call me that,
For sometime, when I've gained my spurs of gold,
And ride, a knight-at-arms by Magnus,—wife
I wish to make thee.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know.”

“Who told thee?”

“No one,—no one but thyself.”

“I never said so.”

“Nor was there the need.”

Now when the moon was high, and Axel slipped
Together with the Prince beneath the robes
Of cat and wolfskin, chattering from the cold,
He told Prince Hakon this, who looked at him
With eyes less kind than common, but no word
To show he listened. Close to Hakon's side
He nestled, and soon slept; but long the Prince
Lay wide-eyed, restless, tossing to and fro,

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

Long hearkened to the riot in the hall,
To pouring mead, to spinning of stone dice
'Neath heavy fists that smote the gammon-boards,
And to the breathing, easy as a babe's,
Of him whose limbs lay warm against his own ;
And when the sleeper's hand was toward him turned
Bore on it, till a sigh escaped the lips
Beside him, and a voice as from a dream
Cried, " Hakon, help me ! " while a soft, warm arm
Stole o'er and tightened 'round him ; then unclasped,
As if the help it sued for had been found.

II. AXEL AND PRINCE HAKON.

Three years took wings. Axel, now grown a man,
Had won his spurs and place beside his king.
No more a squire, a squire attended him ;
And in his chamber, one of the royal suite,
Hung many a shield quartered in blue and white,
Broad-gashed and war-stained, trophies of proud days
When he with picked companions hip to hip,
Had flung the foes of Norland from her bounds.
His glance was like an eagle's, straight and keen,
And added to the vigor of his words
Sunbeams or lightning.

One May morn it fell
As Valborg came from minster, ere her hands
Could lend each other succor and escape
She found them both in Axel's. "Valborg, mine,
To others prodigal thou art with song ;
Sing once to me, that I may feel the words
(Perchance more telltale to thy harp than me,)
Are mine and only mine ; promise me this !"
And Valborg promised, and the hour was set.

That night it rained, with puffs of gusty wind
Fresh from the snow horns. But he minded not,
And long before the time stood closely cloaked
Below the oriel in the women's court ;
Whence looking up he saw the curtains sway,

Saw the bright outlines of a harp and one
Behind it robed in white, and heard her say,
As to the bevy of girls who circled her :
“ A minne-song I promised ; here it is,
And to the ears that give the closest heed
Belong the words.”

Melodious began
The prelude, rich with changing symphonies,
Sending the world far spinning into space
And lifting the rapt listener to a realm
Of finer feeling. Then above the strings
Arose her voice, first like a far-off sigh,
Betokening love's beginnings, wordless still ;
Now gaining confidence, and flushed with hope
Climbing to higher, ever gladdening strains ;
Till buried by the deepening chords, the voice
Was lost and all the melody confused.
There seemed vague wanderings without a goal,
Hovering of wings without the power of flight,
A seeking for some unknown, needful thing,
A sweeping of the strings to find one note
That ever, as she followed it, took flight ;
And when at last it hovered within grasp,
And voice and harp arose in unison
To snare the perfect ending,—with a twang
The string brake off, and with a timorous cry
The note escaped and the unfinished song
Clashed into dissonance.

She started up,
Pushed from her breast the quivering instrument,
And from the window—suddenly become
A hollow of gloom within the gloomy wall,—
There fell a myrtle spray. He stooped for it,

And rising suddenly, sidewise perceived
A shadow in an angle of the wall,
That crouched, and crawling, stealthily drew back ;
Then heeding the low challenge Axel sent,
Retreated to the gateway. " By what right,"
Spoke Axel fiercely, " art thou straggler here?"

" Same right as thine,—because it is my will."

" And now, because I will it, get thee gone !"

A moment passed. The stranger stood his ground,
Strode forward, threatening, then fell back a pace ;
From rattling scabbards whipped two blades of steel
With lightning flash, slitting the robe of night,
Then tried their temper once, and twice, and thrice,
Clashing out sparks. The shadow's line grew less
In height as if the stature 'neath it dropped
Upon the knee, and panting for fresh air
The stranger flung his cloak aside,—when lo !
The crown-prince shrank behind it, lips apart,
Trembling with rage, and lifting a white hand
Sware lifelong vengeance.

Knowing naught of this
Or of his foe, but fearing that some plot
Or treachery might menace, Axel crept
Within the court, and by the barbican
Kept secret guard until the sentinels
Were changed, and from the towers the trumpeters
Aroused the echoes from their eyries perched
Among the hills o'erhead, and one by one
Undid the eyelids of the drowsy town.

III. THE KING'S BIRTHDAY.

In hay-month fell the King's birth-festival,
When at the north in ever visible course
The red sun circled, linking week to week,
Wedding the passionate noonday with its mild,
Sweet counterfeit, the drowsy midnight, roused
From sleep by soft caresses of the sun.
With gay processions and unstinted feasts
The day was honored, and this fiftieth
The King had set his heart upon to mark
With unused pageantry,—part urged by pride,
Part forecast of those hasty musterings
When Dovre's cliffs, with terrible shouts of war
Far echoing, should snatch their ox-pelt shields
And hurl a hurricane of brand and sword
Upon the valleys; or the fiord awake
To find its highway to the offing stopped
By pirate craft,—times when the Norland crown
Might any hour be banded, fist to fist,
By any who begrudged it. As chief prize,
The helt foremost in mounted fray might claim
The key to Norland's treasures,—landed rights,
Or lordship, privilege, wife of high degree,—
The choice of any largess that the throne
Had at disposal.

Until noon was past
The field was given up to ruder sports:

The King's Birthday.

Foot-races, free to all, and feats of strength,
Pleasing the commoners, to whose loud mouths
Success or utter rout seemed quite the same
So long as there were roughness.

Then the joust ;
Each fresh-groomed steed from stables of the King,
Chosen for him from many a royal mews
Sacked by freebooters,—some from Angle-land
Or shores of Normandy, some Spanish bred,
Fleet-hoof'd Arabians ; and the knights that rode,
Dukes, jarls and herzers, haughty and light-haired,
Were all of royal lineage,—at their head
Prince Hakon, ruddy faced, and by his side
Sir Axel, younger by a year, and slight.
The last all loved, and as his stallion passed
The stagings, cheers went up, and not a few
Laid wagers on him.

“Valborg,” said the Prince,
“The spaaquinn tells me that success this day
Lies in thy riband. Pray thee, let it plume
My helmet.”

“Pardon, liege, but half of it
Already reddens one.”

He answered not,
But at the bugle beck, mid rounds of cheers,
Across the plain captained his waiting corps,
Steel clad, sonorous, sending back the sun
A thousand lightning flashes ; and thick dust
Uprolling, covered where they went.

For hours
The warring lasted ; pair by pair they strove,
Till now there rested only two, the Prince
And Axel. When these gained the middle field,

And Axel saw his foeman and was told
This was the finish, letting fall his lance :
“ My liege the King, to him award the prize
It best becomes,—I, Axel, do withdraw ! ”

The King, well minded it should be so : “ Son,—
And well we wish thou wert our second son,—
So be it, and to thee the second choice,
E'en though it be our daughter, and with her
A moiety of our kingship after us.—
Name then thy choice ! ”

But meanwhile, 'mong the mob
Of herders, whalemén and horn-handed folk
Fresh from the ox-goad and the kemelin,
There rose a tumult ; fierce to see the end,
These in the ominous pause beheld the last
And daintiest of their day's sport plucked away,—
And some held weighty wagers thus undone,
While others, more remote and knowing' not
The cause, launched loud-mouthed rumors 'gainst the Prince
Of foul play,—that Sir Axel had been drugged,
That threats withheld his hands, elsewhere so strong,
In favor of the Prince, dislike of whom,
Or at the best indifference, to flame
Flashed suddenly. Quick through the rabble ran
The lust of mutiny : “ Axel, let us see ! ”
“ They 've butchered him ! ”—“ The Prince dealt evil blow ! ”
“ We will have Axel ! ”

Which news having flown
By hurrying messengers to the smiling King,
And with his own eyes seeing here and there
The bounds thrown down and a tumultuous mob
Approaching, quick he bade his trumpeter

The King's Birthday.

Shout forth this proclamation : " Hold your peace !
The prize is not yet dowered ; still remain
Two swords unsplintered ; Axel with the Prince
Will now try metal. Thus the throne decrees ! "

One minute, and before the herald's cheeks
Had lost their swollenness, the freshening breeze
Had blown the message into every ear ;
And from the tall hills round about came back
The words, seven times repeated : " Throne decrees ! "
" Decrees ! " and—" Thus the throne decrees ! " So died
The clamor, and the summer storm was stilled.
The sea of sand, wrecked o'er with shattered steel,
Lay sparkling ; and the curious sun, half hid
Behind a gathering cloud-bank, dallied, flushed
With interest. Two shapes of bronze stood forth
The horsemen,—one with helmet favorless,
One flecked with sparks of red, that had withstood
The rain of forty lances.

Like a week
Of days, this day to Valborg ; since high noon
She had kept place upon the highest bench
Where Axel left her, these words on his lips :
" Hither will I look up, as to green hills
Flashing with rivulets, and find new strength."
Below, the courtiers quarreled o'er their cups,
And toasting her cried, " Hail to Hakon, too ! "
And the grave King, vexed that his wish and will
Had thus been thwarted, prone upon his lounge
Was somewhat less than king.

" Let us go down,"
Said Malford, Valborg's maid.

" Nay, nay, my girl ;

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It is for them that fight, and not for us
Mere lookers-on, to faint." But pale her cheeks;
Each whistling sword-sweep seemed to steal her breath,
His name alone found audience at her ear,
His helm alone shone through the dusty air,
And each hurt horseman that they carried past,
Blood-stained, disheveled, arms hung dangling down,
Was Axel, with white face upturned to hers,
Her favor still upon him.

"Valborg, child,"

The Queen said, "Courage yet!" See where they come!
Our Hakon's besom now hath swept the field
Of all save one; so have no further fear,
For he is oak-strong, and his foe, though lithe
And willowy, hath less persistence."

Pale

With sudden giddiness, down on her knees
Dropt Valborg, like a lily broken-stemmed;
Lightly they bore her to the royal booth,
Where, whispering in her ear, again the Queen
Spoke kindly: "For Saint Olaf's sake, arouse!
And Hakon, conqueror, soon shall make thee well."

But like one dead the maiden lies; hears not
The clash of steel as round the field they edge,
Horseless and bleeding, both with broken swords,
Mid closing circle of spectators, dumb
With dread and hoarseness;—sees not through the dust
The thrust and parry of their battered blades,
Their visors up to freshen the scant air,
Their staggering steps, the fast descending dusk;—
Feels not the chill of the uprising gale,
As all the gray west piles with mountain clouds,

The King's Birthday.

Black-browed and threatening. She must waken now !
A din of tongues and trumpets tells the end,
And Axel, crowned as victor, from the shield
And shoulders of his seconds sliding down,
Thrusts back the screens and bursts into the booth
Exclaiming : " This, O King, I claim ! " — But no,
She gives no welcome. And when loud and harsh
Like a wroth bear, the nearing thunder growls,
And in confusion from the benches pour
The people townward, stormed by wind and rain,
Still 'neath the tent-skin lies, as if asleep,
Wynhilda's daughter, fairest of the court,
And chiefest prize of this day's tournament.

IV. THE SPAAQUINN.

Right merrily the months rolled. On her hand
Now Valborg wore a slender link of gold,
One link, and slender as a daisy's stem,—
But from it trailed unseen a thousand links
That bound her life to Axel, her betrothed ;
And on her bosom lay the silver lamb
That he had hung there, bounding at each breath.
Among her maids she sat, and smiled to hear
St. Olaf's chimes ring out their vespers. Glad
The bells seemed with her, and she smiled to think
How soon their calling would be meant for her.
The flames she watched lapping the logs of spruce,
And with them let her fancy climb and fall,
Breathed hard and harder, felt her face aflame,
Until, before she knew it, wet with tears
Her cheeks shone, and the wondering maids drew close
To press the reason, twining round her neck
Their fair, white arms, and burying their cheeks
Upon her breast to hide their own wet lashes.
“ Sweet mistress, why shouldst thou have thought of grief ?
They say that to be good is to be glad,
And thou art like an angel in this place.”

“ Forgive me, dear ones, but I only weep
For too much gladness,—more than I deserve,
For I have lodged an idol in my heart,
And that is sinful.”

The Spaaquinn.

With a sudden shriek
That brought the frightened listeners to their feet,
She rose and started backward, as an owl
Down fluttered from the gable to the warmth,
Fire-blinded; and with beating, aimless wings
Smote 'gainst her as it passed, and at her feet
Let drop a little feathery fall, snow white,
Of ruffled plumage.

“Christ’s name!” cried the maids,
“Put by thy marriage till the grass-month comes;
This bears some evil import.”

With a smile
She shamed their counsel, saying: “Fear no ill!
St. Olaf sounds the vespers; drowsy-brained
I had forgotten, and this bird was sent
To bid me. Let us go.”

One only stayed,
The timid Malford, Valborg’s favorite maid,
Who murmured as the silken curtains sank
Behind them, “What it means I do not know,
But thing more ominous than that!” She stooped
And sought the feathers (seven there were), and brought
Them to the chiefest prophet, who was called
The Spaaquinn, saying: “Mother, read for me
The wisdom of this plumage.”

Then the witch
Each feather pointing, pierced a small blue vein
In the girl’s wrist, and on a parchment wrote
Seven words, one word with each; and each red word
Was fellow to the others,—each was “Year.”

“Unravel further,” gasped the maid. But dumb
The shriveled lips became, while through the door

The feathers fluttered, taking to themselves
The semblance of a crow, that trailed a gloom
Across the bare fields as it southward sailed,
Sent back hoarse croakings, passed the yews, and now,
Low hovering 'bove the foot-hills, slowly dimmed
To nothingness.

From the gray, empty sky
The girl turned wonderingly, pushed toward the seer
A little pile of silver, and again
Said softly, "Mother, make the writing plain,
I cannot ken it;" to the doorway drew
Until her heel lay 'gainst the threshold, stood
Large-cyed and open-mouthed, as if spell-bound;
And from the mutterings of the spaaquinn's trance
Caught here and there new cause for terror.

"Out!

Ye carrion that call vultures, out on ye!
If scarlet, draggling in your purple gore
Be spotted, be it ripp'd and ragg'd and sown
Upon the hurricane! —The years' long scroll
Unrolls and shouts their secrets. Girl, behold!
I see the writing of these feathers wrought
In flaming words, like crinkled lightning scrawled
Across the sky. Read through my withered eyes!
Behind white Dovre drops the sun, and leaves
A night unmooned for four-score tardy months,—
Unstarred save by a lurid comet. Lo!
Now blossoms the late morn, with blaze of warmth
That sets the whole world dancing, keeping time
To its own laughter. They who grieved are glad,
And find but witchery in the sidewise glance
Of such as I am. But bend down thine ear,

And hear'st thou not the rumbling of the ice
Far underneath the powdery crust of snow,
That chaps beneath the sun-heat? Nearer sweeps
The babel of its voices, like the blast
Of wild fjeld-slayers from the mountain clefts,
Or giddy smoke-squall; and a hurricane
Of sudden ruin smites the empty throne;
While through the raining ashes, twice,—aye thrice,
Our Norland's coronet crashes to the ground,
Spilling its jewels; and beside it grovel
Two spurred and armored men, blood on their lips;
And by them,—many warriors weeping near,—
Lies prone, a sceptre in her nerveless grasp,
This virgin wife, this queen unscarleted,—
Saint Valborg of the owlet plumes."

Of this

Naught to her mistress told the shuddering girl,
But when to the warm room the group returned
From their devotions, Malford being maid
Remained with Valborg after all had gone,
Unlaced her jacket, loosed her stomacher,
And freed from its light snood her flaxen hair
Down flowing o'er her bosom to her knees,
Still tarrying that by chance there might arise
Excuse for words.

"Art thou not slow to-night,
And weary, Malford?"

"Mistress, slow I am,
But not from weariness. I only think
'Twere well to wait the grass-month. 'Twere not long,
And sometimes waiting is the wisest speed.
I beg thee take it kindly."

Two white hands

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Fell on the speaker's shoulders: "Malford, mine,
I know thou lovest me and wishest well;
But little maid, who now for full five suns
Hast been a sister to me, art thou sure
Thy love is quite unselfish? It may be,
Without so meaning, thou wouldst dally time
That thou mayst longer feel my room thine own,
That thou mayst cling the longer close to me,
No other having right to come between.
Is it not so?"

"Nay, nay, thou wrongest me!
I do so love thee that thy joy is mine."

"Then press me not to put off one short hour
That fuller cup to-morrow offers me.
I know the fear that thou hast felt to-day,
But let the portent promise what it will
Scarce could it more unhappiness foretell
Than this delay thou wishest. Many moons
Already I have waited, patiently
Living on hope, but hope too long put off
Will starve the soul, nor is the pain less keen
Nor death less pitiful than if our strength
Were drained by dogwood. Malford, mine, good night!"

V. ST. OLAF'S KIRK.

Full of sweet promise smiled on Olaf's walls
The moonlit morn, and joyously the bells
Tossed down their benedictions. Late the fall,
But mild ; the luminous air was crystal clear,
And as the visits of the sun were short,
At his first gleam above the glowing north
Wide open swung the gates of iron and oak,
And from the King's house towering 'bove the town
Forth rumbled the court chariots. Like a prince
Rode Axel, with the royal coach-and-six,
The King beside him ; and behind these came
The Queen and Valborg. All the streets were choked
With people, thronging to the minster square,
While from the roofs above them rained green sprays
Of holly and of Christ-thorn, and the breeze
Bellied a thousand banners.

At the kirk
Each passed before the stoup, crossing himself,
Then entered ; and behind the bridal train
Swept in the multitude. The rites began.
The pageant of procession lent the aisles
A noonday splendor, and the unseen choir
Seemed like an angel chorus shouting down
Their hallelujahs and their glad amens.
In stately order moved the ritual, led
By Rome's vicegerent, ranked above the King,
The good Archbishop Eiwen, richly stoled

And golden mitred, no tiara'd pope
E'er loved or venerated more.

Then rose
And stood forth Blackfriar Knud: "In the name of God,
These bans I do forbid. Behold the law,
That none of kin shall marry; here I hold
The pedigrees of those thou wouldest bind,
And here discover that by fourth degree
These two are kindred: Sturlsen, sire of one,
The cousin-german of Dame Gudrun, aunt
To Axel Tordsen."

Still as death became
The thronging aisles.

"The record also shows
That at the font in Highborg both were dipped;
And by the selfsame nurse, a year between,
These two were suckled."

The Archbishop spoke:
"What envious tongue has fired thy pious zeal?"

"That bears not, Father. I but point the facts,
My finger on these dates; you, Father, ken
The clavis and the moment of these laws
The Church hath made."

Then followed hot debate.
Twelve clerks were called, whose goose-quills being trim'd,
Rose one by one, and in as many shapes
Set forth the case, repeating ages, names,
Till they who hearkened half forgot their own.
The hoary Bishop from the altar came
To vouch the parchment scrolls; and Erland too,
Archdeacon and most learn'd in law, stepped down
To note the clavis. Two long hours or more

The clerks heaped round them ponderous registers,
Ramparts of vellum, till at last the monks
Came empty-fisted from the cloister shelves,
Finding no others.

Restless grew the crowd,
Weary with waiting. Now and then arose
Rough voices: "Less of law, more justice give us."
"What haggard monk, this Knud,—is he the Prince
Costuming?" "Where, then, skulks the Prince?"

At this

Axel unlocked the arms that circled his,
Strode down the steps to where Prince Hakon stood,
And said, low-voiced, though not a word was lost:
"My cousin, from a boy thou 'st been with me,
Known my each thought and wish, and well hast known
My noblest thought, my dearest wish, was this.
If then thy lips can fashion any word
To silence this contention, speak it now,
And prove our love is mutual. If thy will,
Unwittingly, I've crossed in anything,
Speak now, that I may know the seeming wrong
And haste to right it."

"Why appeal to me?
Of what concern to me this clerly strife?"

—"The same that 'tis to me, my cousin Prince,
If thy love be the same as mine toward thee."

"I am no law-wright, nor hath my tongue skill
To lick laws from their tablets."

"But art thou
The breath enkindling them? Forgive me, cousin;
I doubt thee not, but speak and silence these!"

“As for the pack, if barking please their throats,
Why, let them clamor! Commons have that right,
And welcome! As for thee, Sir Knight, doubt not,
For as to thee I have been, so I am.”

The red robe of Prince Hakon, Axel kissed,
And answered: “I believe thee.”

Now the kirk
Grew still as if no breathing thing were there
To lend the sunshine motes; and when at last
There came a sound, it was the Bishop's voice,
Who with uplifted hands and jeweled staff
Bade silence, and with measured, echoing words
Proclaimed: “The Chapter hath defined the law,
And we, as guardian of the Church's faith,
Which ye do all respect, these bans forbid!”

Then to the pair, who speechless stood, he gave
A table-spread, bade each to hold an end,
And with clear voice: “As we, the Church's arm,
With this estramacon do smite in twain
The texture of this fabric” (here he stretched
The blade between the two, cleaving the cloth),
“So for all time to come, till time be done,
And the all-mother take you to her breast,
Do we estrange your bodies and your lives;
Break ye no bread together!”

To their feet
Ran the white raveled ends. From Valborg's wrists
He loosed and took the golden ornaments,
Slipped off her spousal ring, undid the chain
Clasping her amulet,—a silver lamb,
That leapt and sank between her rounded breasts,—

And gave to Axel ; who receiving all
In the hollow of his palm, looked now at them,
Now vacantly at Valborg, then strode down,
Flinging the baubles into empty air ;
And following where they fell, jingling like bells
On Olaf's baldachin : " By the white Christ,
Whom I acknowledge,—Olaf, patron saint,
And all that's holy ! if I wed not her
Then go I henceforth widowed ! And in place
Of helm and doublet, will I hide myself
In cowl and sackcloth ; ne'er again be called
' Sir Axel, knight and soldier,' ne'er again
Sip bubbling mead, or look in woman's eyes ;
But smeared with ashes will I cloak myself
From the fair world and smiling face of day,
And like a sneaking cat-goupe waste my years
In some vile hill-hole."

Then with thin, hard voice
Spake Valborg : " Better so than disobey
The Church, our blessed mother. Glad are they
Who breathe a little time love's mountain air,
And catch a glimpse of life's broad pasturings.
Regret not ! What we have been, that we are,
Each day the riper fruit of yesterday.
I, too, will now forswear the world, will go
With the sweet sisters to their peaceful home
Upon the hills. I, too, will spouse myself
A bride to the white Christ. Good-bye ! Good-bye !
My brother ! Rest content. I am content !"

But as she spake, the telltale tears gushed forth,
Giving the lie ; and all undone by sobs
She flung herself upon him, clung to him,

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

Kissed his thin lips, and lifting a clenched hand
Against the white-stoled Bishop, with the rage
Of a wild creature cursed his hallowed name;
Then heavily sank, lying in death-like swoon,
And silence filled the aisles. Sharply without
Were heard the scraping of dead twigs, and drip
Of frost-damp from the gargoyles' grinning jaws,
Smiting the pebbles.

On their heads they felt
The Bishop's consecrated hands, and heard :
" May Christ's baptism of peace descend on these !
Christ pitieth them that grieve, loveth them best ;
In Him shall ye find comfort. Bear in mind
That life is short, and duty its chief end,
Not earthly joys,—the right its own reward ;
And now to wed, unless the Church of Rome
Gave special unction, were to barter heaven
For this world's pottage."

—" Father," Axel cried,
Breaking upon the blessing, " Is there then
One star unswallowed by the monster night
That now encompasses me ? Speak, Father ! Can
The maker unmake ? Can the Pope enswathe
And coffin, if he will, this loathsome law,
Long dead—as with my finger I might point
'Mong them before us,—and with papal key
Lock down forever this unrighteous ghost
Now fronting me ? "

" He has all power, my son."

" To Rome then go I ! God ! am I an owl
To wink thus blindly, thinking a shorn poll
Stuff to outbalance justice ! Golden words !

Once more a soul they give me ; now once more
Life's pathway opens, and the world holds out
Its million helping hands, willing and strong,
That beckon Romeward."

" Hard the journey is."

" A soldier counts not hardships."

" Perilous,—
Through trackless wildernesses, hostile hordes,
Snow-hills, morasses and malarial climes."

" Strong-bodied, I fear neither foe nor clime."

" And long the marches ; years must pass before
Thou canst return."

" That, truly, do I dread ;
But if thou, Valborg, hast the heart to wait,
I will be patient. What say'st thou to that ?"

Valborg looked up.

" If I go forth to Rome,
And by thus going, gain again the right
To claim thee, Valborg,—how long wilt thou wait ?"

" Forever, Axel."

" What say'st thou to that,
My Father, is that time enough ? Love-spurred,
I will outwing the wild swans in their flight !
Your blessing, Father ; I will start this day,
And every mile-stone that I put between
Her feet and mine, will whisper to myself :
' One mile the nearer Valborg ! ' "

Tenderly

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

The blessing fell, and with the words rare tears
Of sympathy upon his flaxen hair,
Those holiest of holy water drops ;
Then many hands sought his, whose trembling grasp
Told why no words came with them.

“ Rome ! to Rome ! ”

Rang through the aisles, and at the Bishop's beck
The choir pealed forth a triumph seldom heard
Save when the kings went forth to war, and loud
The bells responded. With few, common words
The lovers said farewell, swore faith to each,
Then turned to part,—when Axel, wheeling round,
Cried : “ Valborg, ere we give a last good-bye,
A sign we'll leave here of our mutual vow.”

Leading, he sought the portal of the kirk,
And halting, stood before a tower of talc,
That sprang from the gray pavement to the roof.
Then plucking from its sheath his soldier's sword
He channeled in the stone the letter “ A,”
For Axel ; then to Valborg gave the sword,
Who wrought upon and over this, a “ V,”
Forming a cypher.

“ See ! ” he cried, “ We two,
Though severed this day once, once more are bound ;
By this I pledge my faith, by this record
Thy promise made before these witnesses ;
And when again my eyes salute this sign,
By this, O Valborg, will I claim thee mine ! ”

VI. THE BELLS.

"To Rome! to Rome!" rang through the bustling town.
This way and that ran men; and women, full
Of care, made show of doing some small thing
To tell their sympathy.

The elder folk
Counseled less speed, but Axel only said:
"To sooner start is sooner to return,
And claim to a short life an added lease."

So escort was prepared to strengthen him
Till he should cross the treacherous Dovrefjeld,
His arms were furbished, rations wrapped in skins
New willow rackets fitted to his feet,
And thousand things tucked in his saddlebags
As kindly as uncalled-for. Letters three,
In runic characters fair writ by monks,
The Bishop gave him,—making audience sure,
And setting forth the object of his quest
And pilgrimage.

At one o'clock, both sky
And sea were overcast, and a damp chill
Pierced all who worked not. In an hour more
The autumn sun sank down, and when the smith,
Lacking for light, looked up to see who darkened
His doorway, clouds he saw, and flakes of snow
Whirling in millions, burying fast the town;
While Dovre, Roros and the Kjolen horns

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

Were peak'd snowdrifts, heaven a snowdrift too,
All colorless as a universe unborn.
At three the streets were dark ; a gusty wind,
Bleak from the sea, growled at each unbarred door,
And from the open roofs snatched burning tufts
Of vrac, that chased the smoke-clouds and but made
The gathering gloom the thicker.

Axel stood

Within the smithy : " Come man, you must end,
Or with three shoes we travel."

" Master, nay !

Sally not forth this night ! All yesterday
The air was filled with partridges, whose flight
Foretold the coming of a northeast snow ;
And if I read the weather-sign aright
That racks this shoulder-blade of mine,—King's head !
'Tis no mere flurry threatens."

Breaking off,

He glanced across his shoulder to the door,
Dropped from between his knees the stallion's hoof,
And straightening himself flung off his cap
To welcome a new comer. —Lo ! the King !
Who shook the snow-flakes from his cloak, and said :
" Wait but a week, Sir Knight, and we will find
Fit escort for thee. Pick thou from our band
Of men-at-arms a score that please thee best ;
These will we freely grant, a horse to each,
And a fleet ship, provisioned and well manned,
To make the Danish coast. Rash-willed it were
This night to risk the roads, buried so deep
That roads there are not. But one week from now,
Or when, thereafter, first the moon peeps through
Heaven's curtains, go,—our blessing following thee."

The Bells.

Thence Axel sought his chamber, tried to sleep,
But could not ; rose again, and made his way
Into the men's-hall, where the night was noised
With gammon-board and mungat ; watched the sparks
Leap snapping to the wainscoting, or fly
Straight upward through the vent-hole into night.
Warm was his welcome, but he found the words
Unmeaning, and could only pace the floor,
Like a strong creature pent within a cage,
And measure with his ear the deepening drifts
That walled his passage. Stepping to the door
He slipped the iron hasp ; a mighty force
Tugged at the door-string, and he faced the wind ;
Felt glad to feel its buffets on his cheeks,
Felt glad to wage war with it, and strode out
'Gainst snow and tempest.

Long within her room
Sat Valborg, lonely, head upon her harp.
She tried to sing his favorite song, but failing,
Slipt wearily to bed. Hour after hour
She lay and listened, till at last she lost
The sense of hearing, and the household slept.
Sudden she wakened, stifling, and arose
Upon one elbow, wide-eyed. What was that,—
A footstep at her door? Soft slipping down
From the warm hollow of her eider nest,
She ran and pushed the curtains to one side:
“What wilt thou?”

But no answer was sent back.

Returning to her bed she flung herself
Face downward, and a torrent of hot tears,
And sobs escaped her. Rousing from deep sleep

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

Her maid arose and joined her, and in fright
Cried : " Mistress, art thou ill? "

" No, no, not ill,
But thirsting, Malford ; bring me some cool draught. "

She stood there in the fire-lit room, alone.
Again she seemed to hear the curtains stir ;
Was it the wind ? The flickers built tall forms
That stalked the floor, and whispers of the night
Ran through the fire-glow, sending to her cheeks
A flush that was not fever. Ere it fled,
The girl's voice : " Mistress, here I have your cup. "

She touched it not, but through the dimness leaned
And to her bosom drew the drowsy girl,
And kissed, and kissed her on the lips and neck ;
Then tried again to sleep, but dreamt wild dreams,
Now seeing Axel's corse, with Olaf's walls ,
All swathed in mourning wraps ; now leaping up,
Thinking she felt his breathing burn her face.

All night the fine snow piled upon the roofs
And drifted 'gainst the doorways ; all next day,
And still the next and next, it fell and fell.
A fortnight more no horse could find the road.
The third week Axel started. The King rode down,
A hundred knights at heels and half the town
Beside him ; bade godspeed, and to his belt
A broadsword hung, saying : " Be true as this !
Remember thou art soldier of our crown,
And lend thine arm and this to each just cause,
Fearing no foe. " Sir Asbiorn too was there ;
And Father Eiwen, who upon his face

The Bells.

His thin hands laid : " My son, whose bed I hoped
To consecrate with hyssop, thy return
I may not welcome, but our Valborg will,
And thou wilt find her still the same. May Christ
Go with thee, and in safety bring thee back."

At kirk knelt Valborg, the cold altar stone
Reeling beneath her. Filled with choking grief
She could not say good-bye, but by a page
Her rosary sent him ; and when he had climbed
His horse, and on the far-off bridge she heard
The dull tramp of his troopers, up she fared
By stair and ladder to the bellman's post,—
For he was mute, and could not nettle her
With words' cheap guise of sympathy. There perched
Beside him up among the dusty bells,
She pushed her face between the mullions, looked
Across the world of snow, lighted like day
By moon and moor-ild ; saw with misty eyes
A gleam of steel, an eagle's feather tall ;
And through the clear air watched it, tossing, pass
Across the sea-line ; saw the ship lift sail
And blow to southward, catching light and shade
As 'mong the sheers and skerries it picked out
A crooked pathway ; saw it round the ness,
And, catching one last flicker of the moon,
Fade into nothingness. With desolate steps
She left the bellman and crept down the stairs ;
Heard all the air re-echoing : " He is gone !"—
Felt a great sob behind her lips, and tears
Flooding the sluices of her eyes ; turned toward
The empty town, and for the first time saw
That Nidaros was small and irksome, felt

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

First time her tether galling, and, by heaven !
Wished she'd been born a man-child, free to fare
Unhindered through the world's wide pastures, free
To stand this hour with Axel, as his squire,
And with him brave the sea-breeze. Aimlessly
She sought the scattered gold-threads that had formed
Life's glowing texture ; but how dull they seemed !
How bootless the long waste of lagging weeks,
With dull do-over of mean drudgeries,
And miserable cheer of pitying mouths
Whistling and whipping through small round of change
Their cowering pack of saw and circumstance !
How slow the crutches of the limping years !

PART SECOND.

Scene, the same ; period, about 1157.

VII. THE STRANGE KNIGHT.

Seven years were passed, when on a summer night
(In hay-month, so they tell it), with worn horse
A warrior came from southward.

In his train

A dozen horsemen rode, strangely attired,
And full of quip and laughter, school-boy like ;
But not a word he uttered. 'Cross a bridge
He spurred, the twelve close clattering by his side,
Recalling stories from their beardless age,—
But not a word he uttered. Then another,
And there were six behind him, spurring too,
Leaving the finish of their tales untold,—
But not a word he uttered. And at length,
When he had crossed a third, he rode alone ;
Heard nothing save his stallion's hoofs and breath,
Felt but the pounding of his saddle-gear,
Saw nothing, till his horse, well winded, lagged.
Then looking up he found the heavy road
'Tween Domaas and Fokstuen well-nigh passed ;
Before him lay the level way to Jerkin,
And 'round, the Dovre-fjeld, a waste of moss
And heather, whence the ptarmigan arose,
And buzzards circling prey, with here and there

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

A lonely tarn made noisy by the loons ;
While the snow horns, above, were glorious
With dazzling day.

Buried once more in thought
He rode on steadily, nor looked again
Till on an eminence he slackened rein,
Beholding to the north a tiny town,
Far, far to northward, backed against a hill,—
Three leagues perhaps, but in the luminous air
'Twas but a league, and every little thing
Shone forth in detail. Well he knew those towers,
That long-kirk, and the glittering holm alive
With fishing smack. Each sight and scent and sound
Spoke to him, saying "Welcome!" Still the air,
But filled with small, sweet noises: plaint of gulls,
Circling their young, the flight of cormorants,
Waves lapping on a beach; nearer at hand
Brooks babbling, larches talking low together;
And from the vales below, under the hills,
The far, faint buzz of labor, that now seemed
A pleasant pastime, and he longed to stand
Among the workers, working to be found.

Passed were the lichen belt and gloom of pines;
Now here and there were foot-paths, saeter-huts,
And herds of grazing cattle, that looked up
And turned mild eyes upon him. With each step
The grass grew taller, greener. Waist-deep stood
The oat-fields, o'er whose billowy green, now ploughed
By the swift pinions of the passing wind,
Slow sailed the brown cloud-shadows. Further down
Were strawberries, tempting the stray passer-by,
Forget-me-nots leaning above the streams,

The Strange Knight.

Small gardens green with leeks and clambering beans ;
And by the roadside, daisies spilled milk-white
And poppies marked his pathway.

Turning back
He found none following, and dropping down
Wetted his kerchief in a spring, to cool
His pulse. Was this indeed fair Nidaros,—
His home, and Valborg's? Springing on his horse
Again he galloped, loose of rein, his spurs
Red-spotted, white his horse's flanks ; heard not
The ocean nor the whistle of his plume,
Saw only Nidaros, heard but his heart
Loud thumping on his mail.

Again he paused
Upon a knoll, and saw the town more near,
Its glimmering spires, broad clusters of black roofs,
The streets deserted, for 'twas early yet,
And on the hill beyond, the walls and towers
Of Norway's monarch. Then came sudden fear,
A chill ran over him, his breath grew short ;
Glad to be near, his purpose well-nigh failed,
And but for pride he would have turned and fled,
As from a foe too terrible to face.
He tried to calm himself, an old air hummed.
Why had he hurried so ? Were some one here
To bear him company, 'twere less forlorn !
He saw no human being, and he seemed
The world's last, lone inhabitant. Should he
Await the coming of his followers ? No,
His lips were far too full. 'Twas better thus ;
Unspoken to, he had no need to speak.
“ But by the saints ! ” (forgetting that he came
Unheralded), “ The welcome's cold enough !

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

These might have sent me greeting and a troop
To ward me."

Then alighting from his horse,
He went on slowly. What if she were gone?
The thought was like an axe-blow, that descends
And stops all power of thinking. Walking still
His feet forgot their way, and looking up
He found a cliff before him. Halting short,
He swept his glove before his eyes as if
To brush away a cobweb. Wed she could not;
Her promise, was it not, "I'll wait forever?"
But there is bridegroom that hath but to ask,
And though the maid hold back and look abashed,
And shriek denial,—seizing her slim wrist,
Blue-veined, Death makes her mistress.

Now he stopped,
Feeling the air all tremulous with the noise
Of sweet-mouthed bells, whose voices had so oft
Brought peace and comfort. Fountains were his eyes,
And one great sob burst from him; then glad-faced
He walked on, surer footed, toward the road.
Regaining it he heard a girlish voice
Climbing the hill, and with it came the girl,—
A swine-herd, slight, brown-ankled, hardly weaned
When he left Nidaros.

"Good-day to thee!
Know'st thou the lady Valborg? Fares she well?"

Biting her herd-staff, "Sir, I do not."

Grave
His eyes became. "Where do you live? Is this
Not Nidaros 'neath us?"

"It is Nidaros,

And there I live."

Slowly he faltered on,
His step grown ten years older. Presently
A rattling cart approached, and to the wight
Who drave he beckoned, thinking to himself,
How quick this fellow's heels will fly to bear
The news loud-mouthed unto the waking town.
"Know'st thou the soldier Axel?"

"Axel?—no;

He tarries not in Nidaros, that I know;
And it is better thus; too many swords
Fatten already, father says, upon
Our hard-earned substance."

"This to thy father take
To give him cause for impudence!" His cloak
Upflew, as with his lance's hilt he smote
The cowering knave, showing his vest of chain.

Marking the smoke that followed from the wheels
Fast disappearing, Axel sate him down,
Nor looked again until upon his face
He felt hot breath, and close beside him stood
His war-horse. Resting thus, he heard below
More hoof-beats, and a mule came leisurely,
Bearing a woman loaded down with stuffs
And candles for the abbey. And it seemed
When she drew near, that in her face he traced
Outlines not unfamiliar. Coarse her garb,
But whole and span clean, and in form and mein
A gentlewoman.

"Greeting! Canst thou tell
A stranger where good Father Eiwen dwells?
I would salute him."

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

On her breast she crossed
Her palms: "Heaven bless him, he's long dead."

The knight
Knelt, crossing too. "And lady Valborg,—say!
Does she yet live here? Has she gone away?"

"Nay, nay, sire! She still lives in Nidaros,
The sweetest woman of the Gildish race.
No wonder that the king well loves her."

— "King!

What king?"

King Hakon,—but you see she trothed
A helt, Sir Axel; who by some strange law,
(I never fathomed it), rode forth to Rome
Some seven years back, and, as the chances were,
Returned not."

"Does this lady love the King?"

"They say so, and that seven trothed years elapsed
She'll be our queen; e'en now they clepe her thus
In whispers. Not a half hour since I saw
Her enter at the minster; speed thy horse,
Thou'lt see the fairest face in Norland when
She steps from matins."

"Thank thee much, but first,—
I used in Nidaros to call each child
By name; but long ago, and faces change,
And also names, when girls that wear them bloom
As fair as one I think of;—at the font
Wert thou not christened Adelaide?"

"I was."

"Thy sire, Sir Asbiorn?"

"Was, and is, thank God!

The Strange Knight.

And though this Hakon's bitter hate, because
He 'friended Axel, has clipped off his spurs,
There lives none kindlier, stauncher to his word,
More loyal to the crown."

"That well I know;
To me he is a father, and with thee
I claim a brotherhood. Why, Adelaide!
Know'st thou not Axel Tordsen? I am he!
And by this blade that Hakon's father hūng
Beside me, saying, 'Be but thou true as this,
Lending thine arm and this to each just cause,'
Sir Asbiorn shall again wear gilded spurs,
And thou white samite!" But of Valborg now,—
I would gain audience with her, and at once."

Then by the roadside talking, all was planned;
And as the messenger of Adelaide,
Whom Valborg loved, he rode toward Nidaros,—
Rode furiously, but ever as he flew
Was outraced by the wings of his desire.

VIII. THE WRITING OF THE SWORD.

The King, followed by Valborg and her maids,
Swept down the aisle from matins, while behind
Curtsied the courtiers. Leaving these she sought
The shrine of Mary, bright with yellow flames,
And on it hung a pair of outspread wings
Wrought in fresh wax: "O blessed Mother, speed
His flight! Thou knowest, Mother, my long years
Of watching, full of faith; and how my path
Is hedged about and darkened. Bend thine ear,
O blessed mediator! Hear my prayer,
And give me my beloved!"

Looking up,
Her face still radiant with earnestness,
The King stood waiting: "Lady, for thy weal
I still press suit. Why longer waste the years
And thy best bloom by flying in the face
Of fortune? Is it then such luckless fate
That when one lover fails thee, there should come
A second, offering thee, with equal love,
A queenship? Let us now put by the past,
And make the present ours. Thy plighted troth
I have respected; it is now fulfilled."

"Nay, nay! My troth is lifelong."

"Be it so;

But lifelong as to Axel, not to thee!

The death of one breaks every covenant seal,

And gives the other freedom. Doubt ye still?
The Chapter shall consider it. If they
Judge otherwise and say thou still art bound,
Then will I no more follow thee,"

"Too fast !

Thine eloquence outfoots thy logic, sire,
For to begin with,—Axel is not dead !"

"I fain would please thee, Valborg, if I could ;
I sympathize, for I too am bereft
And brotherless. But Axel is no more.
I have a courier just come back from Rome,
Who on his trail long followed, and now tells,
That unavailing being Axel's quest
He joined a Rhenish court (to thee we'll give
The names and dates), was to a princess wed,
Found fame in war, and fell in an affray
Long moons past. Thou shalt look upon his sword,
And weigh the proofs. We find them sadly strong,
And have on yester-night made every plan
To celebrate to-morrow, with due pomp,
The burial service of our cousin and friend,
The soldier Axel."

"Have a care, my liege !

I doubt thy servile courier ! Have a care
That when the empty tomb is 'neath these stones,
And wax-illuminated has become the shrine
Of every soldier, Axel come not back
In life, more terrible than sheeted ghost,
And blight thy hasty zeal."

"Say thou the word,
And we will wait a month."

"Wait then a month,

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

And set thy sawyers and thy quarry-men
To building 'bove the earth, not underneath,—
For triumph, not for mourning. Axel comes!
This yester-night when thou hast lost thy sleep
With planning pageants for an idle day,
I dreamt, and needed not the spaaquinn's sight
To spell the vision. Axel comes apace!
Fetch here thy lying henchman,—he shall feel
This altar trembling 'neath a soldier's tread,
And shake with ague pains. Lag but a month,
And, by my soul! there'll come new cause for lagging."

While this was said, the stranger gained the kirk,
Slid through the portal, dense with staring saints,
Dipped finger at the stoup, and snugly wrapt
Entered the grove of stone and hid beneath
The trunk of a gray pillar. Standing there
He watched the courtiers hasten to the street,
And ladies pausing till the choir had ceased,
Malford still lingering, and by her he knew
That Valborg was not distant; then the King,
Whose foot-falls brought his hand upon his hilt,
Only to drop it, feeling his own feet
Pull toward the scarlet; and the old-time love
That bound him to the boy-prince flashed again,
And fain would he have fallen, kissing him.

Then Valborg came, upon one finger-tip
Poising a circlet of forget-me-nots,
Pale blue; and all else having left she sought
The portal near where Axel crouched concealed;
And halting, stood before a tower of talc,
That sprang from the chief corner-stone, and rose

Like a huge oak-trunk to the vaulted roof,
Where with a hundred more it intermeshed
Its branches with the gloom. Then with one hand
She loosed the faded yester flowers, which like
A ring'd aureola inclosed the sign
That he and she had carved, and with the other
Replaced it with the fresh wreath, murmuring low :
“ Hail, love ! good-morning ! ”

As a page would kneel
Knelt Axel, without words ; pushed out his glove,
And held the letter sent by Adelaide.
He felt it from his fingers slip to hers,
He heard her say, “ It comes from Adelaide,”
He heard the wax seal crackle as it brake,
And waited for her answer,—breathing hard,
Scarce able to keep back a wild, loud cry
That struggled in his throat,—his left hand close
Upon the telltale armor, lest his heart
Should noise its secret to the jingling links,
And they to Valborg. Fast she chased the words,
Then read and re-read, too much dazed to pluck
The meaning from them, panting, stormed by doubts,
And fearing treachery. Thus ran the words :

“ To Lady Valborg. greeting ! Courage yet !
Thy seven-years waiting now is nearly done ;
The horns of Dovre have saluted him,
And while thou thinkest not, he shall approach,
And when thou knowest not, before thy feet
Kneel and salute thee.”

“ Who, lad, gave you this ? ”

“ The Lady Adelaide.”

“ And sent no sign

Whence she received it ? ”

“ Lady, yes ; ”

And 'neath his mantle tugging at his throat,
He loosed the rosary that there had hung
Since he left Nidaros, and handed her.

“ Where is the giver ? ”

“ He awaits your word.”

“ Up, lad, and fly ! and tell him Valborg waits.”

Then suddenly before her rose the tall,
Cloak'd stranger, leaning 'gainst the wall of stone,
Lest giddy, he pitch headlong at her feet,
Let fall his mantle, and in coat-of-mail,
Bronze-faced and whiskered, Axel stood before her ;
And blindly, for his eyes were drowned with joy,
Stretched forth his arms and found her.

When at length

These two came streetward, Hakon and his court
Had passed ; but 'round the Knight a curious throng
Soon hovered, peering at his arms and dress,
The tongue-tied bellman 'mong them, who pushed close,
And starting back, his wrinkled face all smiles,
Dropt on his knees ; then nimbler than was wont
Sped to the dusty bell-loft 'mong the bells,
Made their mouths his, and they, wagging their tongues,
With shout and laughter and loud, musical runs
Told all the city, crying : “ Axel's come !
He's come—come ! Oh ! he's come—come ! ”

“ What's afoot ? ”

The King asked, loitering from the barbican,
And looking valleyward ; “ What mean these shouts,

This crowd, this jubilee?"

"They mean—they mean—"

A courier gasped, speaking between quick breaths,—

"They mean that Axel's come, and up the street

Rides, Valborg at his side, and at their backs

The rabble world, uncovered, casting flowers,

And crying: 'Long live Axel! who was dead,

But now comes back to be our king!' And close

In front ride galloping all your men-at-arms,

As dazed and crazed as the rest."

With quick commands

The King withdrew within his walls; creaking

The gates swung on their hinges, hidden springs

Burst through the moats, loud roaring, and aloft

Blazed flags of threat, and mail of armed men

With fire and missiles.

These things being known,

The Knight alighted, and a messenger sent:

"Fair cousin, peace I bring; no thought of harm

Possesses-me. I went but to return,

And now, my seven-year questing being done,

I come again, my liege's loyal held,

Ready to war if there need be of war,

And need of me, but for him, not against;

My arms the arms that thine own father gave,—

Companions, men who with the King were bred.

Naught else have I save a small parchment scroll

Sewn in my mantle, that the Pope addressed

To the first bishop, which if thou wilt read,

Most innocent thou'lt find of treachery

Or treason 'gainst the realm, save only this,

That I have come to rob the Norland crown

Of the most precious pearl that brightens it,—

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

The Lady Valborg. Cousin, I greet thee fair!"

An hour or more the couriers were afoot,
Then down the drawbridge thundered on the moat,
Linking once more the kingdom with its king.

IX. THE FEAST OF WELCOME.

No sleep that night. All folk were in the streets,
Laughing and garrulous ; the shouting bells
Called in the herdsmen and the herring fleet,
Curious to know the news, and patiently
To each fresh comer was the story told,
With each retelling gathering incident,
Until it grew a marvelous fairy tale,
And Axel a great king, whose thousand knights,
From playing quoits with coronets, had now
Returned to dower Norland with their wealth ;
And they who listened looked to see the south
A bristling forest of huge bottoms, slow,
And wallowing to the gunwales, overtasked
With precious burthen.

Lavish feast was spread,
And all invited,—a rich barbecue
Filling the kirk-square ; and to every mouth
Was served its measure of sweet barley bread,
With herring, smoking trenchers savory
With ven'son brisket, bear's ham, and its fill
Of milk or mungat. High above their heads
Who elbowed to the tables, and above
The minster's topmost finials, the King's hill
Was circled by a twinkling diadem
Of torch and bonfire ; and the halls and courts
Of Hakon's house were thronged with merry guests
Off'ring their clamorous welcome to the Knight,

The Legend of St. Olaf's Kirk.

Who sat at table, Valborg at his side,
Clinking his silver cup to all who came.

But now the feast was ended ; the men's-hall
Was cleared of all save those who served the throne,
While Axel, seated at the King's right hand
Upon the high-seat, Valborg close beside
To catch each syllable,—to hungry ears
Rehearsed the history of his seven years' quest ;
Which seemed, as he recalled them, looking back
O'er changing scenes, now sunny, now forlorn,
Close trooping on the heels of others, still
More strange and more impossible to paint,—
Like seven long lifetimes.

With clear, rapid speech
He caught and led his audience. Up the Rhine
He rowed them, pausing on his oars to point
Its royal cities and staunch fortresses
The Romans builded ; pierced with devious course
The upper country, dense with virgin woods,
And sparsely peopled by strange, roving clans
Still headed westward, hearing on sand shores
The far-off drum-beat of the ocean waves
Sounding the summons, " Onward ! " Now arose
The white horns of that Norland of the south,
Helvetia, wrapped about by thunder-caps ;
And guided by the witch-wand of his voice
They passed the grim Black Forest, painfully
Mounted the foot-hills, and with rackets shod
Forced passage by their pike-staves through the clefts
Of niggard Alpine passes, choked by ice
And wrack of avalanches. Then, glad-faced,
To Italy's fair summerland they came,

And following the highways straightway reached
Its capital ; beheld white palaces
Ashimmer with the sun-heat, mighty domes
That mimicked heaven's pantheon, gates of brass,
Through which shone glimpses of the papal state,
And granite arches thrusting to the sky
The blazonry of Rome's imperial past.
They tracked its streets, with wonder looked upon
And wonder looking ; mingled with the tides
That swept to senate, bath and circus, eyed
And elbowed by a bustling world, strange-faced,
Strange-habited, speaking the Leden tongue.
Then with quick pulse he sought the papal See,
And kissed the pious robe of Urban, pope
And father of kings.

Here pausing in his tale,
Fresh skins of wine were broken, and glad harps
Sang hallelujahs.

Now the journey home,
With long delays and constant war with fate ;
Now swooped on by freebooters, and compelled
To pay rich ransom for a captured mate ;
Now beaten back by far outnumbering hordes ;
Now forced by pitfalls to forsake worn paths
And circuit trackless wildernesses, lost
And famished ; now a prisoner, serving time
In sky-perched eyries, with fierce feudal lords,
Till he should purchase liberty, each league
The price of blood, or time—more precious still.
Two years he lingered tracking down the Rhine ;
Was tripped at Mauth-thurm by its robber-knight,
And forced to serve his river-toll ; again
At Falkenberg ; then Sooneck's slender tower

Choked the great highway, and long time he bode,
And then at Furstenberg, and Drachenfels
New-built.

Burning were his words, and they
Who listened saw the bending river pour
Before them, saw its dark ravines, each topped
By a gray castle, crouching panther-like
Above the bridle-path, hungry for game.
They tasted the plump grapes that he had plucked,
They felt the sting of capture, and with him
Grew pale in donjons.

Then with changing state,
Having snatched victory to his victors' grasp,
The purses at his waist grew fat with fees,
And by proud dukes he rode an equal, sued
To swear allegiance, take for wife his pick
From loveliest of the ladies, and become
The fellow of crowned heads. Fearing denial
He lingered, prisoner bound by golden chain;
Joined in their forays, and bent down by spoil
Returned at night to where the pitch-pots glowed;
Strode through the bustling courtyard, all ablaze
With feudal splendor, and at wasteful feasts
Brimmed beaker. Then by winding stairway mounting
He sought his chamber, whose rich tapestries
Stiff with embroidery of silk and gold
Conquered the darkness, making night alive
With peacocks, pecking jewels from the grass,
Lithe tigers lapped in sunshine tropical,
And palm-trees splendid in a sunset glow;
But the bright colors of the figures blurred,
As though they flickered neath a breathing wind
Swaying the cloths; he felt the hateful chains

The Feast of Welcome.

Snap from his ankles, and the stifling air
Grow fresh, as if a rising gale swept down
From Kjolen's clefts; and leaping to his feet,
Eyes swimming,—with alert resolve aroused
His mates, slipt leash, and under cover of fog
Again pushed forward.

Thus the story ran,
And as he spake, each listener seemed a part
Of that he spake of.

With one hand in his,
Sat Valborg, drinking his warm eloquence,
Feeling her small horizon stretch away
Into dim distance, and her heart's desire
Leap like a flame toward higher destinies.
Then looking in his flashing, restless eyes,
She nestled closer in his circling arm,
Thought Nidaros first city in the world
While he stayed, and with restful indolence
Cared not at all which way life's pathway led
So long as he walked with her. Glad she was
To feel that Olaf's town was very small,
And she no more could lose him. Dear old town!
Its every house-front, by-way and green tree,
How fair to her! Rome, lapped in luxury,
Queen, mistress of the world, could not compare
With Axel's home, the laughing Nidaros!

X. THE FORAY.

With breaking of the daydawn, suddenly
Sprang Axel from the dais and the grasp
Of Valborg, crying: "But my men-at-arms,
Where then are they?"

Finding them not yet come,
And yet another glass running to waste
Without disclosing cause, with troop of horse
He sallied forth to seek them. For long hours
He followed up the river Nid, and then
The roaring Gula, scoured the mountain roads;
And when the sun was highest on the hills,
He came upon fresh signs of combat, gouts
Of blood and shattered lances on a bridge,
A dead steed floating 'neath it; and near by
Each rocky fastness held a hundred foes
Prowling by stealth to pounce upon the town;
But who, it seemed, beholding as they came
War-signs about the palace, flags awake
And drawbridge lifted, thought their presence known,
And lemming-like had burrowed. On the scouts
Rushed from their ambush ragged-bearded men,
Shirted with beersercks, hairy head to heel,
With shields of pelt, and in their wake a few
Rich-doubleted, upon whose brazen shields
A wolf's head threatened, by whose hungry eyes
Quick Axel read the menace; these the hordes
Of Oppeland, King Amund at their head,

With swarms of wildmen nursed on Dovre's heights,
Fierce as the bears they lived among,—as wolves
Thirsty for rapine.

Then with bell and smoke
King Hakon called his liege-lords, closed with clang
The city gates behind him, and hied forth,
Sir Axel at his side, to keep at bay
This pirate from the south, whose jealousy
His father had bequeathed him. From tall hills
Down looking, he beheld unnumbered bands
Ascending and descending; while remote
Upon the coast-line, 'gainst the dingy west,
The flicker as of many wings, cloud-white,
Told where the fleet lay, pouring on the beach
Fresh tides of warriors.

“Sire,” Axel spake,
“’Twere best to make short business of this siege:
My counsel this: ’Neath cover of to-night,
When if the signs fail not, there will be wind
And rainfall, to dispatch a band of scouts
By twisted path to where the war-ships swim;
There light huge firebrands, which, when Amund sniffs
And sees the low clouds reddened by their glow,
Will lure him from the hills, thinking his boats
Endangered; and descending by the gorge,
There suddenly, while he is broken-ranked,
We’ll rain upon him a bewildering storm
Of stones and arrows.”

Thus the snare was laid,
And when the bells tolled midnight, ’bove the beach
A dull glare pierced the heavens, and at dawn
King Hakon from the rocks looked down upon
His foes caged in by cliffs, and with loud cries

His army leapt upon them. Brief the fray
But murderous, for thinking his reserve
Was severed, Amund losing hope of help
Fought rashly, seeing not his sons at hand,
And ere they came, was massacred.

Then short
The victors turned to break the second band ;
But weary with much slaughter, and now faced
By equal and fresh forces, long the strife,
Till they who from the city watched, now ceased
Their watching, for the night-fog covered all ;
And till the King, seeing his spearmen flagged, .
And that the bowmen lacked for shafts, called up
His troopers, and with Axel at his side,
Into the thick of it flung his battle-blade.
Like troll-stones beat upon him shaft and axe,
Till, borne down by the weight of many arms,
From his tall horse he pitched, and o'er him howled
A pack of hairy beersercks.

Seeing which,
Came Axel spurring, and a blood-red path
Cleft to him, dealing deathblows left and right,—
An open swath, such as the mower cuts
Through a ripe oat-field ; and behind him sped
The footmen, who outran the mounted troop,—
Hampered by dead and dying,—and unchiefed
Strove onward, gaining courage with their speed,
And never stopped till like a roaring wave
Crashing upon the shore, they swept it clear.
The wolf's eyes dimmed, the dukes of Oppeland,
Fierce margraves, and the first of Amund's sons,
Lay groveling in their heart's blood, while the few
That gained the sea, there perished like poor flies ;

And the proud fleet, like tempest-driven birds,
Flew seaward, drave their beaks into each other,
And beached upon the skerries. Ne'er before
Was seen such booty as that morrow poured
Into proud Nidaros,—and ne'er again
Such woeful tidings as were that day breathed
To sobbing Nidaros. For when the dawn
Lay bare the wreck of carnage, and the friars
Toiled through the rock-clefts to relieve the quick,
In a dark hollow walled about by rocks
(The “Goal of Ghosts,” now called) the searchers spied
Among the sprawling dead, two horsemen pierced
By one another's spear-heads, bleeding still,
Still quivering. And lo! when they were turned,
This was their king, blood spots upon his lips;
And this, the other, face down on a shield
Quartered in blue and white, the people's pride
And favorite, Sir Axel.

Dumb with awe

They beckoned helpmates, did whate'er they could,
Then summoned a confessor, who knelt close,
And thus King Hakon breathed into his ear:
“Before heaven's judgment-seat, whose cherubim
Will soon salute me, it was I who dealt
My comrade deathblow; blinded by the dust,
Neither knew what he did; and he is blameless,—
But not so I, for in my heart of hearts
Have I in years gone-by oft mused on this,
Envious of him, and murdered him in thought.
Shrive me of this.”

Then Axel lifting moan,
Hakon leaned toward him, and upon his brow
Slipt the slight golden crest that marks a king;

And when the Knight, from stupor wakening,
Gazed on the faces 'bout him, these last words
Still lingered in his ears: "My cousin, this—
I give thee, cousin Axel, it is thine—
And Valborg's. Living, I have done thee wrong,
And done her wrong whom most of all I loved;
Which dying, I do now repent. Forgive!
Forgive me! This my will and testament,
And these be witness: All I have is thine,—
And Valborg's."

Tottering stiffly to his feet,
And flinging the regalia from his brow:
"My crown is other!" fiercely Axel cried;
"Release me from this death-coat! Give me air!
Would ye then stifle me! Make me a space
For sweep of broad-sword! Do ye not behold
A new foe challenges?"

Then changing mood,
He pushed his hands out as a blind man would,
And gasping, murmured: "Lay me at full length;
My sword I need not longer; these gilt spurs
No more become me, who have found a foe
'Fore whom I cower. Hark! the bridal bells
Mellow the morning air; they ring for me,
And I am ready. Lo! the bride appears,
In white apparel, snowdrops in her hair,—
Welcome, ye pallid Death!"

With gentleness
The monks laid off his armor piece by piece,
Then caught him as he reeled into their arms,
Nerveless, a broken lance-head in his side,
And 'cross his neck and loins long gaping wounds,
Bleeding red rivers.

The Foray.

“Lady Valborg call!
And with her the Archbishop. Spare not speed!”

Mounting her palfrey she came galloping down,
Thrusting aside the ministers of state
And the red robes the people pressed on her,
And crouching, held her breath till he should speak.

After a little time he moaned and stirred,
Pushed under him one elbow, ran his hand
Across her features, saying, “Is it thou?
Then am I once more well,—but not for long.
What must be done, must now be quickly done.
Take my two hands in thine;—fear not to fret
These scratches,—I have been more hurt, and healed.”
Then hoarser voiced: “Draw nearer to my lips,—
They are rebellious. Valborg, Valborg mine!
Long time we’ve waited, but not all in vain;
Love’s faith that waits and watches, fearing not,
Makes life its own great recompense, and death
Shall do the rest, sifting the right from wrong,
And joining those erst parted. Valborg mine,
My life-work were not finished were we twain;”—
(Then to the Bishop), “Father, but confirm
The sanction of the Pope, then shrive my soul,
And bless us both.”

The eucharist received,
He fell back feebly, drawing up his knees,
And murmured huskily: “Sing, Valborg—sing
That song,—thou knowst the one.”

Standing she sang,
And ever and anon brake off for weeping,
But found the phrase and with new strength of wing

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Upbore it, caught the secret of the song,
Flew with it heavenward, till the kneeling throng
Looked up askance and crossed themselves: "Is this
Our Valborg, or a vision?"

Tearless still,
"I cannot more!" she said; then raised one shriek,
For looking, Axel lay before her dead,
His glazed eyes turned to her.

And when the friars
From Axel's body help to lighten hers,
She too had taken flight,—the virgin wife,
The queen unscarleted,—flown with her song
And him,—Saint Valborg of the owlet plumes.









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